Turmoil at THE FOX

by Mitchell J. Shields

The Fabulous Fox Theatre reopened in October of 1975. In the nearly two and one-half years of operations, the Fox has yet to resolve a host of problems in its management and administration...The resolution of these problems requires the immediate dismissal of Ted Stevens as the general manager of the Fabulous Fox Theatre, the hiring of an enthusiastic and competent manager, and the reorganization of the theatre.

Richard Wilson, former production liaison for rock shows at the Fox, traces the lines with a finger and reads them aloud. They are contained in a 63-page report that outlined ways the managment of the Fox should be changed. Much of the report presents examples of what the Fox should emulate—the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center, New York's Avery Fisher Hall, and New York's Alice Tully Hall.

Nothing controversial there. Even Ted Stevens agrees that many of the suggestions for reorganization are sound. But there is controversy.

In the first nine pages of the report, nine pages that carefully excoriate Stevens and the way he has run the Fox, it is found. The headings say it all—*Ted Stevens Relationship With Promoters And Producers* ("performance in this area has shown many inadequacies."); *Ted Stevens's Relationship With The Theatre Staff* ("inability to provide proper direction is evident"); *Ted Stevens's Management Of The Building Space* ("the existing space has not been used to its best advantage."); and *Ted Stevens's Public Relations* ("it seems that the initial impression a visitor receives at the Fox is a negative one.")

"We tried to avoid personalities as much as possible but, yes, a lot of the problem is Stevens," Richard Wilson says. Around the table at Manuel's Bar, five others, all former employees of the Fox, nod in agreement.

Wilson says, "He is a Nixonian figure. He has driven a number of dedicated people away, and unless he leaves most of them will never come back."

A few days later Ted Stevens listens to what has been said about him. His response is short. "As far as the charges are concerned," he says, "they're silly."

For over a year there have been rumors that all was not well within the walls of the Fox. But the rumors rarely escalated. Someone would say he had heard from someone that someone else had been fired for no good reason. Hard information was rare. Occasionally there would be a major foul up, as on January 1 of this year. A large concert had been scheduled for 7:30 p.m., but the doors of the theater were kept closed until 7:15 p.m., forcing thousands of waiting spectators to spill out into the streets in the traffic. People complained, but nobody really knew what the problem was.

"There had been some firings, and those who were left didn't know what," Richard Wilson says. He is still fingering his blue bound report, copies of which have been presented to Atlanta Landmarks (which owns the Fox). At the back of the report is a list of names, 110 signatures of people who would like to see management of the Fox change. Over half those signatures belong to present or former Fox employees. According to Wilson, immediately before Christmas a list of the names got into Ted Stevens's hands. The Fox closed down for a few days, and when it reopened some of those on the list had been fired. "What you have to understand is that all of us love the Fox," Wilson says. "When this was happening it still hadn't been saved. We didn't come forward earlier because we didn't want to endanger the building. We were afraid that bad publicity might keep people from contributing, and we didn't want that."

But now that the Fox has been saved, he adds, there's no reason to keep silent anymore. "Our main concern is that the Fox is such a fine theater that it deserves to be run in a first class way," Wilson says. "But it's not, and people who want to do that are given so much trouble that they end up leaving."

The report that Wilson and those associated with him hope will reform the Fox's management began to be put together in early 1977. At the time Wilson was still employed by the Fox, but was daily growing more disenchanted with how the theater was run. His disenchantment hinged on what he felt was the bad attitude of general manager Ted Stevens. As far as Wilson could tell, Stevens was never available when he should have been. Calls from people wanting to book shows into the Fox went unanswered, and requests from employees for supplies were ignored. A signed statement by Richard Rosenthal, representative for the Atlanta Peachtree Chapter of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, details how one booking went awry.

According to Rosenthal, in the fall of 1975 he approached Stevens about renting the Fox for the Barber Shop Quartet organization's annual show. For several weeks Stevens failed to return Rosenthal's calls, and when contact was finally made, Stevens was "curt and abrasive over the phone and insinuated he was doing me a favor by even spending his 'valuable' time with me to talk about the Fox." Nonetheless, agreements were made about renting the theater. It was over a month before a formal contract arrived and, Rosenthall claims, "when I opened the envelope—much to my surprise, there were many items of expense added on to the contract that could conceivably almost double the cost." Rather than pay the extra money, Rosenthal withdrew his show.

In another alleged incident, Charles Walker, one time Head of Restoration for the Fox, was forcibly removed from the theater. As two witnesses to the event recall it, Walker was attending a private organ concert at the invitation of one of the players. He had left the Fox almost a year before in irritation over the way restoration was being handled, and then for four months wrangled with Fox management over money he was owed, finally going to court to get it. After the dispute over payment was settled Stevens is supposed to have said that Walker would not be welcome in the Fox again, either as worker or guest. On the night of the organ concert Walker was spotted by Stevens. Incensed, the general manager is said to have ordered security guards to throw Walker out. They did. The woman Walker was with, an employee of the Fox, was later fired.

It was in this atmosphere that Wilson began gathering what information he could on how the Fox was run. He began detailing some irregularities at the request of friends on the Fox staff. At first the research was done from within, but in May 1977 Wilson quit his job at the theater because "I could no longer lower my standards and ethics and principles to tolerate the injustices done to myself and many others."

Still, Wilson had friends who shared his views working at the Fox, and in June 1977 one of them approached Atlanta Landmarks executive board member Arnall Connell with some of the complaints against Stevens. Connell listened and asked for more concrete information. During the summer and fall of 1977 the first few pages of what would turn into a suggested reorganization manual were put together. Ten one-time employees of the Fox worked on the report, six of that group putting together the final draft.

The executive board of Atlanta Landmarks was supposed to be looking into the issue too, but when the complaining employees and the board got together in October only the employees' study was nearing completion. To press the seriousness of the matter, a sheet was circulated to obtain the signatures of all those who felt the Fox's management needed changing. It was then that new firings began—those fired being the same ones who signed their names to the petition.

In January another meeting with Atlanta Landmark's board was requested. It was put off until after the announcement that the Fox's mortgage had been paid and the building saved. On March 10 Wilson and the group of which he had become acting head with five of the six members of Atlanta Landmark's board—Beecham Carr, Harold Stokes, Joe Patten, Joe Myers, and Arnall Connell. They were given copies of the blue bound reorganization manual with its indictment of Ted Stevens. Then the former employees settled back to wait for action.

Ted Stevens feels that any action is unlikely to take place. To him, all the charges, all the complaints, are the result of the anger of some fired employees. "Truthfully, I think it's just a few people and their vengeance," he says. "Unfortunately, a number of those people who were volunteers are very bitter. At one time, before the Fox opened again, volunteers were very important. But as the operation became more professional we needed more professional workers. Some of the volunteers think they have been overlooked and ignored. I'm just very sorry they carry such bitterness."

Stevens brushes aside charges that he is incompetent by saying that if he weren't good at what he does, the Fox would not be turning a profit. He does not deny the incident with Charles Walker—"I don't really recall, one way or another. I've seen Charles in the Fox. Anyone who has a ticket is going to be let in. If there's something private, I suppose he's not welcome." Nor does he deny charges that he won't let people who signed the reorganization petition work at the Fox—"As far as employing people here today who were involved with the petition or booklet, well, that just wouldn't be harmonious. You know, it's like vipers in the bosom." Still, he claims 20 years in theater and performing arts management make him the right person to keep the Fox going.

"My first obligation was to get this building paid for, and maybe I didn't have time to do some of the public relations things people wanted me to," he says. "With the mortgage gone, I can get to some other things. I'm not worried about this report. I'm very confident that I will be here as long as I want to be here."

Wilson closes his reorganization booklet and laughs. "Stevens has been trying to clean up his act since he found out about this," he says. "Suddenly he's answering the phone and becoming more available. Even *I* can see him now. But it's too late. He's already done too much to too many people." Wilson and the other dissatisfied Fox workers are willing to let the final decision rest with the board of Atlanta Landmarks. They're only hoping that decision is the right one.